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THE NATION; U.S. Asylum for Chechen Draws Protest From Russia; The separatist republic's exiled foreign minister is wanted on terrorism charges. The issue could damage the countries' relationship, experts say.

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Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON The Russian government will protest a U.S. decision to grant asylum to an exiled Chechen leader considered a terrorist by the Russian government, an embassy source said Thursday.

Ilyas Akhmadov, the foreign minister of the exiled leadership of the separatist Russian republic, received asylum Monday after the Department of Homeland Security lifted an appeal filed this year, Akhmadov said in an interview.

"I am very happy this is over and I want to stay here and do what I can to work towards a political resolution to the conflict in Chechnya," Akhmadov said.

Russia issued an international arrest warrant for Akhmadov on terrorism charges in September 2003, and the Russian government objected when Akhmadov applied for political asylum in the United States, accusing him of associating with international terrorists, including Osama bin Laden.

The Russian Embassy source, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the Russians would demand more information and that U.S. asylum for Akhmadov could damage the cooperation between the two countries.

"We are very much disturbed and concerned about the situation," the embassy source said. "We are trying to get more data on what happened."

Asylum would "contradict the existing spirit of our relationship and partnership on counter-terrorism in particular," the embassy source said.

A Boston immigration court granted Akhmadov's asylum application last spring, but the Department of Homeland Security appealed the decision on June 1. It withdrew the appeal on July 13, and the grant of asylum decision became final on Monday, Akhmadov said in a telephone interview from his home in Vermont.

Chechnya is a complicated issue in relations between the United States and Russia.

On one hand, Russia is a declared ally in the "war on terror," and U.S. officials believe there have been some ties between Chechen rebels and Al Qaeda.

The United States has placed Chechen rebel leader Shamil Basayev on its official list of international terrorists; the Chechen government-in-exile has at times been supportive of Basayev.

On the other hand, the United States supports a peaceful settlement to the conflict and has expressed concerns about abuses committed by Russian soldiers in the occupied republic.

An exiled Chechen leader was assassinated in Qatar this year; authorities there have convicted two Russian intelligence agents in the murder.

"The issue of Chechnya is very sensitive for the Russians so anything involving Chechnya is very difficult for U.S. and Russian officials to deal with," said Fiona Hill, an expert on Chechnya at the Brookings Institution. "This could be a flash point."

Russ Knocke, a spokesman for the Immigration and Customs Enforcement division of the Homeland Security Department said that officials filed the asylum appeal in June "out of an abundance of caution."

But he said the department eventually concluded that the evidence purporting links between Akhmadov and known terrorists was inconclusive.

"After about two months of review and briefings and discussion among attorneys within the national security law division and other colleagues in the government, we were in a position to know better the facts in this specific case and be confident in the decision to lift the appeal," Knocke said.

The decision was hailed by the American Committee for Peace in Chechnya, a group which championed Akhmadov's asylum case.

The group said Akhmadov had been granted a fellowship by the National Endowment for Democracy to press for a peace process in Chechnya.

"The grant of asylum and the award of the NED fellowship should be helpful in the peaceful settlement of the tragic Russian violence against Chechnya," committee chairman and former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski said in a statement.

Akhmadov was reappointed this month to the foreign minister-in-exile position by Aslan Maskhadov, the rebel leader who was president of Chechnya's self-declared independent government and one of the chief proponents of a negotiated resolution to Chechnya's conflict with Russia. Maskhadov was elected president of Chechnya in an internationally recognized election in 1997.

In 1999, Russia sent troops into the rebel republic after apartment bombings attributed to Chechens killed hundreds in Moscow and other Russian cities, eventually forcing the Chechen leadership into exile.

Though Akhmadov has repeatedly spoken out against terrorism, especially since filing his asylum application in the U.S., Maskhadov in recent months has adopted a much more militant tone.

He claimed direct responsibility this month for a bloody rebel raid in Ingushetia, the republic that borders on Chechnya, that killed almost 90 people in June.

Maskhadov, who had always been careful to distance himself from major terrorist attacks, also vowed to kill whoever wins the Kremlin-engineered presidential elections scheduled in the republic later this month.

In an interview videotaped for Chechen Television, a transcript of which was distributed on the Kavkaz Center website, Maskhadov vowed there would be "massive operations" in Ingushetia and "an expansion of the theater of operations."

The website also displayed video footage of Maskhadov standing next to Basayev, who had taken responsibility for terrorist attacks on civilians in Russia, including the 2002 seizure of the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow that ended in the deaths of dozens of hostage-takers and captives.

Times staff writer Kim Murphy in Moscow contributed to this report.

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